

## Op-ed: Maternity and paternity leave - how about more?

The decision by the government of Finland on extending paid maternity *and* paternity leave to seven months went viral on many social media platforms in Qatar. It has also led to further calls to improve paid leave and work arrangements not only for new mothers, but also for fathers.

Maternity leave in Finland is currently 4.2 months, while paternity leave is 2.2 months, with an additional six months of parental leave that can be shared by both parents. In Qatar, the public and private sector is yet to catch up on providing extended maternity leaves and work arrangements for female employees. The current system grants only two months of maternity leave and no paternity leave, which allows very limited time for mothers to prepare their little ones for hours of daily separation from their father, and limits the father's involvement in the early stages of their child's upbringing.

However, Qatar Foundation (QF) provides a model for other institutions and entities in the country to follow, with the changes that it has implemented promoting female empowerment and reflecting its gender-equal environment. These changes introduced flexible working arrangements, adjustments to allowances – especially for female employees – and more parental leave. QF now grants mothers 14 weeks of fully-paid maternity leave, with the option of extending for 20 more days with no basic pay, while fathers are granted five fully-paid days of paternity leave.

These changes are in line with Qatar's national vision, which highlights the importance of building and sustaining family cohesion and strong family bonds, which cannot be attained without implementing and enhancing supportive policies in different sectors. This, in turn, is likely to have a positive impact on the nation's efforts to address challenges such as encouraging female participation in the workforce and increasing the fertility rates.

In an ongoing study that Doha International Family Institute (DIFI) is currently conducting, a number of participants highlighted similar views. Female participants who are currently stay-at-home mothers expressed their willingness and desire to join the labor force if maternity leave was 4-6 months, or if they had more flexible work arrangements such as working from home, which would allow them to be there for their children and family. In addition, some of the participants also suggested they might be open to having more children if policies were in the mother's and child's favor.

Moreover, they emphasized the changing mentality of young Qatari couples and their approaches to active parenting, especially that many young fathers are aware of the importance of their contribution not only to providing for the family financially, but to having

an active role in raising their child. So, promoting policies that also serve fathers can encourage them to be actively involved with their families.

DIFI has already been advocating for policies that promote a better work-family balance, and that recognize this cannot be attained without institutional support for employees. The impact of such policies stretches from improving employees' work satisfaction to enhancing family bonds, as parents can spend more time with their families and have less stress about work, which in turn contributes to their physical and mental health and wellbeing - reflecting positively on the whole society and nation

And it goes further. Granting both parents proper leaves when a child is born can contribute to gender equality, as it facilitates more gender-friendly work environments – and that is the direction that a number of organizations in Qatar, including QF, are pursuing.